

What the USDA Organic Board's Decision Means for Aquaponics and Hydroponics

USDA Organic is a certification process for farms, akin to a long checklist. The label is helpful for consumers to know that any USDA Organic produce they buy has met a minimum standard of organic growing. USDA Organic farms must follow federal guidelines dictating use and quality of pesticides, soil quality, additives, and animal raising practices, with the aim of reducing impact on the environment.

More importantly for farmers, having the USDA Organic label allows farmers to sell their goods at a higher price point than conventionally grown produce. Still, many small farms choose not to certify because it is an expensive process. In addition to USDA Organic, other organic certifications exist, and consumers can also look for labels denoting local produce and humane treatment of livestock.

On November 1st of this year, an important "battle" over USDA Certification came to a head. Unlike in the European Union, USA hydroponic, aquaponic, and aeroponic farms have all been eligible for USDA Organic certification, and in the past decade or so more and more organic hydroponic produce has been appearing on grocery shelves. Proponents of soil organic farming have fought this allowance for over twenty years. This fall, after an opposite vote in April, the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) voted that aquaponics and hydroponics should be allowed to continue to be certified organic, but voted no on aeroponics (a practice similar to hydroponics, but where plant roots are sprayed with instead of suspended in a nutrient solution). Currently, around 100 hydroponics farms are certified organic, only one aquaponics farm, and no aeroponics farms.

Many USDA Organic soil-based farmers say that organic growing should be about restoring the nation's soil, and therefore organic farming cannot happen in the water. Some of these activists, such as Dave Chapman, a soil organic tomato grower, have threatened to leave the USDA label, saying that it undermines the value of the program.

In actuality, there is no legal provision that organic growers must benefit the soil. But in many ways, this anger is due to the fact that increasing amounts of organic produce in big grocery stores are now hydroponically grown by huge agribusinesses. Hydroponic greenhouses can produce, for example, organic tomatoes at a lower cost than soil grown tomatoes. This worries soil organic farmers who fear being edged out of the \$40 billion organic market.

Still, for small hydroponics and aquaponics farmers, the NOSB's ruling is a good thing. Hydroponics and aquaponics farms do use organic practices, so they shouldn't be excluded from the economic benefit of the USDA Organic label. The board's decision is an economic boon to young aquaponics and hydroponics entrepreneurs, many of whom want to start operations in urban areas where there is low access to fresh greens. While